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Comments on Delmarva Conservation Corridor by Butch Nottingham

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about the challenges and opportunities those of us in Virginia face as we work towards making the Delmarva Conservation Corridor more than a really neat idea. In the interest of full disclosure, I need to say that before I became a Marketing rep for the Va. Dept. Of Ag, I was a farmer for 30 years. Most of my thinking about both agriculture and conservation are colored by growing up on a farm, and knowing what it is like to face both good times and bad in the world of commercial agriculture. I am flattered that I have been asked to speak to issues as complex and challenging as Sustainable Agriculture and Ecosystem Management.

There are a couple of facts that stand out in my mind as we discuss ways to preserve a place and a way of life that most of us value highly. Fact number one, sustainable agriculture is profitable agriculture. Without profitable agriculture, all of the programs designed to help keep the rural lifestyle and character of Delmarva will have little chance of making much of an impact on either agriculture or the ecosystem. Fact number two, agriculture is by far the best land use to preserve the quality of the ecosystem. With these two facts in mind, let me address the potential advantages and obstacles that we in Virginia face as we deal with the DCCP.

One of the real advantages of the program is that it forced those of us on committees to think critically about what agriculture needs to thrive in the twenty first century. Although the plans of the two Virginia counties differed substantially, they were driven by real needs of farmers in the field, both in terms of land base and infrastructure. Since I was much more involved in the Northampton County plan, I will highlight some positive outcomes that have occurred as a direct result of drafting that plan.

1. Farmland Protection was identified as a priority issue in the NH county plan. Northampton County is in the process of drafting a PDR ordinance. The ordinance addresses both agricultural and environmental issues. The plan should be completed within the next month, and will be another tool to help both farmers and the environment.
2. The process of drafting the plan involved representatives of the ag community, environmental community, and a large citizen action group. As a result of the interaction of the committee and the exchange of information between groups, it looks like there is fairly broad based support for land use taxation in the County. This is a huge accomplishment that I think is directly related to work that the DCCP Committee did. With the help of committee members, a local farmer and the Nature Conservancy successfully applied for USDA Ranch and Farmland Protection funding to help protect a family farm via purchase of development rights.
3. The regional approach of the total package, and the meetings that were held between states helped everyone have a better sense of what is needed to help keep Delmarva the kind of place we all love. This type of meeting has great future potential as we work to maintain profitable agriculture and preserve our unique ecosystem.

Although there have been positive outcomes as a result of work on the DCCP, there are many challenges as well. Lack of funding springs to mind. Even some of the positive outcomes listed above are dependent on outside sources of income. Virginia has been experiencing budget shortfalls for the past several years, so money to fund new programs is extremely scarce. Since a big part of both Virginia plans consists of infrastructure improvements the lack of state funding is especially frustrating. We have been trying obtain funding by working within the current Farm Bill to secure funding, but have had only limited success. We plan to get better at it.

In short, the potential advantages of implementing even a small part of the DCCP are enormous. The plan has already had a significant positive impact on at least one county in Virginia. With more hard work and a little luck, future generations of Delmarva residents will continue to enjoy the unique quality of life that makes this such a special place.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on the Delmarva Conservation Corridor Plan.